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# I Dream, Therefore I Am: What Dreams May Come

## **Abstract**

In the ultimate sense of "projection" as psychological and ontological creation, this film proposes that imagined reality is the only reality after death. The imagery we are given is primarily European. The theology, however, owes less to western sources and more to eastern concepts.

This film treats some remarkably serious religious issues, such as guilt, suffering, transformation, transmigration, and the essence of the immortal soul. One overriding idea that pervades its presentation is the ancient formulation by South Asian traditions of Maya, that generates the world that we know while simultaneously assuring us that it is an illusion. *What Dreams May Come* is a work of imagination (film) about a work of imagination (life and death), constructing a western illusion about an eastern illusion, all the while addressing western apocalyptic paranoia at the end of the millennium, which is, of course, irrelevant in the east. This essay explores the ways in which the film appropriates and translates such ideas, and reflects upon the causes and effects such usage implies.

Orpheus lost his wife, Eurydike, on the night of their wedding. Magical song enabled him to pass the threshold of Hades, and to win her back, if only he could lead her to the land of the living without looking back. He could not, however, resist the backward gaze, and he lost her to death forever. Bereft and unable to bear his loss, he went mad, rejecting all of womankind. Attacked by raging Maenads, he was dismembered, and his head came to rest on the Island of Lesbos, where it became an oracle until Apollo silenced it forever. Still, Orpheus has been remembered in many forms of art and religion over time, from poetry and song to the Orphic Mysteries to ballet and to film. *What Dreams May Come* is yet another Orphic trope, and like its predecessors, often plays fast and loose with the original version in its remembrance. But there are some fascinating innovations in this variant that tell us important things about the state of latter twentieth century American speculation concerning death, afterlife and the possibilities beyond these. I propose that the crafters of this film were well aware that its insights into the nature of the imagination and its impact on reality, both in life and in death, are South Asian in origin and character. They chose compensate for, and perhaps obscure that fact, by using a visual palette composed entirely of Western romantic artwork.

We are approaching not only the end of a decade, but the end of a century and the beginning of a new Millennium. That carries with it a powerful amount of

energy, hope and unfortunately fear. This film presents a great deal of hope about the true dignity of humanity and our power to love, which is most certainly an antidote to fear and depression.

These words were written by Stephen Simon, producer of *What Dreams May Come*, and are included on the web site of the film.<sup>1</sup> The film offers more, however, than 'an antidote to fear and depression.' If there is one overriding idea which pervades its presentation, it would be the ancient formulation by South Asian tradition of Maya, that understanding which defines the world lila, the play of the divine realm, and gives us the world that we know while simultaneously assuring us that it is an illusion. William K. Mahony, in *The Artful Universe*, writes that "according to Vedic thought," maya "reflected an unfathomable and even miraculous power of creativity and transformation." "The deities' maya was an extraordinary imaginative art through which they drew forth and thereby gave reality to the objective world itself." "The imagination...both internalizes the outer world and externalizes the inner world." (p.6) And "whether divine or human, it is precisely the imagination that fashions and recognizes the universe as meaningful, abiding, and valuable, that is to say, as real." (p.7) And Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, in *Dreams, Illusion and other Realities*, concerning the much later text of the Yogavasistha, wrote "...death is like a dream (or, rather, like an awakening), and a dream or an illusion is experienced as a kind of death. We awaken from ignorance,

or from sleep, or from life; the same verb covers all three." (p.219) *What Dreams May Come* is therefore a work of the imagination (a film) about a work of imagination (life and death), which constructs a western illusion about an eastern illusion, all the while addressing western apocalyptic paranoia at the end of the millennium, which is, of course, irrelevant in the east.

As befits the medium of film, this is a stunning visual cornucopia. Nineteen years in the making, *What Dreams May Come* offers a remarkable use of contemporary high-tech film making in which the imagery is more powerful than the story itself, and lifts that story from an overly romanticized tale about the power of love to transcend death to a display of graphic wizardry. Orpheus, after all, was a singer. his power emanated from the mysterious source of orality, the spoken and sung word. The heroic husband in this film lives in the world of primarily nineteenth century romantic landscape painting. He and his wife are connected in life as in death by the painted image, the triptych of their shared paradise that she has painted. Again, Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty: "... the world does look like a picture; the picture and the worlds have equal claim to real existence." (p.283) And "... in the myths of the shared dream, the lovers often use a painting to mediate between the softest form of experience-the dream-and the hardest form-the actual presence of the beloved." (p.284) That is to say, the Yogavasishta, using mythology

from South Asian tradition, anticipates *What Dreams May Come* by approximately a millennium.

The film is based on a novel of the same name written in 1978 by Richard Matheson, a proto- New Age fable with an afterlife scenario adapted directly from the mythologies of South Asia, that is, India and Tibet. The text itself is only marginally engaging, but its imagery of the "silver cord" that connects one's immortal "etheric body" to the physical body and is severed at death, its requirement of cremation within three days of death, and the offered possibility of reincarnation, albeit by choice, to address what can only be described as issues related to karma theory, tell us that the author had been dabbling in eastern texts. (Matheson pp. 10, 96-97, 101) The bibliography at the end of the novel contorts this. While many of these details are not included in the film, there is other compelling evidence of South Asian influence that shapes its content.

The director of *What Dreams May Come*, Vincent Ward, is also .quoted on the web site. He says the following:

One of the great ideas behind the film is that, rather than there being an objective paradise where everybody's paradise is the same, you create your own paradise and it's whatever you want it to be.

The web page anonymously adds that 'the same applies to Hell.' Naturally, one would not "want" hell to be at all! However, the director's comment is not

precisely accurate. For what Chris and Annie experience is not whatever they want it to be. Rather, it is what they unconsciously expect it to be. While conscious will may affect details of this afterlife scenario, its essential characteristics are determined by the power of the unconscious. I suspect that someone involved in the making of this film has been reading Carl Jung. But in South Asian terms, the power to construct the illusion of life and death is attributed to the divine realm, whether it be Indra's Net, Vishnu's Maya, or the ultimate creative impulse called Shakti in combination with these or acting alone. And since that power is acknowledged to reside as much in the divine human essence as it does in the divine realm, it works its magic through us as much as it does through the will of the gods. In other words, to use the film's own imagery, Chris' heavenly construction, Annie's infernal deconstruction, their heaven or their hell, their despair and their redemption..., all are generated by them, using the divine power inherent in ultimate being. The identity of human and divine is ultimately true, and both have cosmogonic power, the power to create worlds, a decidedly un-western perspective. The Yogavasistha... accords its ontological stamp of approval to the dreaming, magic-making, art-creating parts of the person because it identifies them with the dreaming, magic-making, art-creating parts of God, through the identification of the soul and the Godhead." (O'Flaherty p. 292)

The gist of the director's comment, then, is really that the afterlife, whether it contains pain or delight, is created by the power of imagination: the reality we experience and accept as true is of our own construction. In the ultimate sense of "projection" as psychological and ontological creation, this film proposes that imagined reality is the only reality after death, and perhaps, in life as well. In the Vedic world that William K. Mahony describes, "the sparkling and shimmering sensual world is an imaginary world. This is not necessarily to say that it is invalid or untrue. It is to say, however, that it is a contingent world; its very existence depends on the creative power of the imagination." (p.209) In *What Dreams May Come*, the afterlife experienced by Chris is an exact demonstration of this sensibility. If one expects physical danger or suffering, one shall have it in precisely the ways one imagines it. If one can imagine paradise, it will come into existence ex nihilo with precisely the characteristics one imagines it to have. Thus, Chris' daughter inhabits a world that reproduces in each detail the diorama in her bedroom, and his son, accompanying Chris into hell, joins in the construction of an inferno of burning ships, just as in life he built and destroyed model battleships. Chris locates Annie stuck up to her neck in mud, a scene juxtaposed with a flashback to their life in which she expressed her frustration at feeling "alone in a sea of faces." Those characters who have been dead for a while have learned to take on other bodies; some of them have changed skin color: all appear to Chris as they do for a particular reason (except for Max Von Sydow, the 'tracker' who helps Chris locate



his wife... I think his appearance is really a gift for those of us old enough to remember *The Seventh Seal*). Each and every image in the film's afterlife fantasy has either a visual or a verbal referent in the history of a family member. Reality and illusion have become merged, life and death have become conflated, and perception and intuition have become intertwined. Or as one character remarks: "thought is real... physical is the illusion... ironic, huh?"

Breaking from some basic plot lines established in Matheson's novel, in the film the hero, Chris, and his wife, Annie, have two children, both of whom are killed in a car wreck before the main action of the film begins. Their son Ian first ushers Chris into the world of death after he dies in yet another car accident. While these multiple tragedies are presented in the film with overwhelming sentimentality, their function parallels many narratives of South Asian origin whose purpose is to suggest that human suffering has the potential to open the mind to real wisdom. Unwilling to leave Annie, Chris resists the passage into death. Even once he has discovered its wonders, he remains obsessed, much like Orpheus, with his wife, except that in this case she is the one who is alive. His inability to separate from her, as well as his continuing connection with her through her painting, is explained as an indication that they are "soul mates." When she commits suicide in despair, he rejoices at first, believing that they will be reunited. But suicides do not go to heaven in this fantasy, as in others we know. It is not a result of an external

judgment, nor is it a form of punishment. In this scenario, she is doomed to hell not because she is "immoral or selfish: they (suicides) go to hell for a very different reason. Each of us has an instinct that there is a natural order to our journey. Annie has violated that and she won't face it, she won't realize, accept what she's done and will spend eternity playing that out." The despair that caused her to take her own life, the obsessive guilt over the deaths of her children and her husband, become her afterlife. She cannot imagine any other. She cannot even imagine her own death, for she does not believe in an afterlife. Dragged down by the heaviness of her own despair, she cannot think through the events that have led her to a ruined version of her own home, where nothing works and decay is everywhere, her dearest paintings and books are gone, and the tarantulas she has always feared materialize at every turn. We might say that she has judged and convicted herself, and is eligible neither for parole nor release because of a failure of imagination. She cannot conceive of an alternate scenario, therefore she cannot achieve one. Chris, much like Orpheus, requires serious aid to reach her, and it is not expected that he will be able to rescue her, only that he may be able to say what he needs to say to set his own mind at rest. She will not recognize him, she will be beyond his power to reach her.

The title of the film is from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*: 'For in that sleep of death what dreams may come, When we have shuffled off this mortal coil, Must give us pause.' (Act III, Scene 1). This is a classic of the western cultural canon, of course,

firmly on western ground. But the western deity is no more evident in this film's postmortem reality than he is in much of post-modern reality. Only one reference to the great patriarchal divine father is present: when Chris questions his spirit guide, Ian, about God's location ("Where is God in all this?"), the response is that "he's up there, somewhere, shouting down that he loves us, wondering why we can't hear him, you think?" Rather, it appears that death has its own system that works independently of divine intervention, just as does life. These immutable laws of death, which our hero defies, are self-sustaining, and, like the landscape of the afterlife, are a direct result of human nature and perception. In this Orphic trope, the hero succeeds in extracting his wife from her self-imposed Hades. He does so, in fact, by looking back! When their children died, and she had first tried to kill herself, she remained hospitalized as a mental patient and he would not, or could not, join her in despair. "Sometimes," it was said at that point, "when you win, you lose." Now, by sacrificing heaven for her sake, he succeeds in breaking through to her and moving them both from the illusion/reality of hell to the illusion/reality of paradise. "Sometimes," she says afterwards, "when you lose, you win." The film offers us paradox: the juxtaposition of winning/losing, the reversal that occurs when she breaks through to clarity just as he is sinking into oblivion, the fact that he achieves his goal by deciding that he cannot act. And while it is Chris who triggers the transformation by which they achieve liberation from the horror she has devised, that liberation is realized in the heaven she has devised, in keeping with

the feminine, creative essence of Shakti-Maya. All of this reinforces the impression that whatever the rules of the afterlife may be in this film, they operate independently of divine intervention in the western model and more in accordance with the South Asian model of divine illusion.

Millennialism, and the Apocalyptic imagery that accompanies it, is rooted in western biblical and theological tradition, as we know. South and East Asian traditions are much less engaged in linear models of time, preferring the circular model of infinite renewal. Where time and life are understood as cyclical in nature, the end may be near, but the beginning is never far behind. At the end of the twentieth century, western culture is faced with a peculiar conundrum. Many are aware enough of the apocalyptic teachings of Christian scripture to be both attracted to and repelled by the perceived possibility of the end of linear time. If it does not come as a result of divine action, it may well come as a result of human action. Either way, we seem poised on the precipice of oblivion. Similarly, religion, science and experience agree that even precluding worldwide apocalypse, death is inevitable, and many are not convinced enough in the possibility of an afterlife. This lies at the root of Annie's problem both in the novel and the film. It gives body to the fear that the end is near, and that there is nothing at all beyond it. While the producers of *What Dreams May Come* want us to believe that there is a postscript to death, the identity of that script seems to be Devanagari, that is to say, Sanskrit.

In the end, Annie appears to join Chris in the afterlife she has painted, and the family is reunited there. We might observe that her art has become their life, or their death, or both. "Maya, after all, means artistic creation, and the Yogavsishta teaches us that the illusion of art is of the same nature as the illusion of life. ' (O'Flaherty p.279) But this is not the final word either in the written or the filmed version. It is not long before the last South Asian concept is presented. For here, as in the novel, reincarnation may be chosen in order to work through issues from one's previous lives. While in the print version, Chris and Annie are not united in the afterlife because her suicide makes that impossible, she chooses to return to human life to address these karmic issues. Her choice of location is telling: she will be reborn in India. Chris chooses to live again as well, and plans to join her there. In the film, however, after their reunion in the afterlife, they choose to return together, to "make different choices," and experience the joy of finding each other again. The film implies that they will be in, as Robin Williams puts it, "Jersey." And of course they are reborn as very white Americans. But there is a large presence of the South Asian diaspora in New Jersey, and its influence on the cultural life of that state has become considerable, I'd like to think the filmmakers at least had that in mind.

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<sup>1</sup> www.whatdreamsmay.com (<http://www.whatdreamsmay.com>)

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